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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 002062

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/26/2019
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SUBJECT: URABA SECURITY UPDATE

REF: BOGOTA 1813

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR JOHN CREAMER
REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Local security official told us major drug trafficker Daniel Rendon's (Don Mario's) capture has not affected local crime rates, and that narcotrafficking remains an enormous problem. The FARC, ELN, and criminal groups grow coca in the region's national parks, ship drugs out through the Gulf of Uraba, and cause large-scale displacements of local communities. Local authorities lack the funds to adequately assist the region's estimated 150,000 displaced persons. They are also grappling with an alarming spike in youth violence, which they attribute to lack of education and employment. Still, they agree that the paramilitary

demobilization and GOC military pressure on the FARC have produced enduring security gains. New 17th Brigade Commander General Hernan Giraldo appears committed to preventing new human rights abuses, and supports aggressive community outreach and development programs. End Summary.

DON MARIO'S CAPTURE HAS HAD NO IMPACT ON KILLINGS

2. (C) Giraldo and local Colombia National Police Commander Colonel Jorge Murillo said the capture of major narcotrafficker Daniel Rendon (Don Mario) in March has had little impact on local murder rates. In fact, they noted that his arrest has opened the door to other would-be kingpins, from both within and outside Don Mario's group, who are now fighting to take his place. Local Organization of American States Mission to Support the Peace Process (MAPP-OEA) Coordinator Javier Aguilar told us MAPP-OEA is still trying to determine what, if any, has been the impact of his capture on violence and narcotrafficking in the region. He also speculated that narco-killings may increase in the short-run as competing figures and groups fight among themselves to establish dominance.

3. (C) Giraldo confirmed narcotrafficking remains a serious concern throughout the region. The FARC, ELN, and criminal groups grow coca in the Nudo de Paramillo national park, a 1776 sq.mi. area in Antioquia and Corodoba departments, and

in the Los Katios national Park, a 278 sq. mi. area on Colombia's border with Panama. He said the FARC's 57th Front conducts logistical re-supply through Los Katios, which extends into the Darien region of Panama where well-established FARC training camps exist. He also noted that there is a high concentration of narcotraffickers in the northern part of the region along the Gulf of Uraba, an important export link in the international narcotrafficking supply chain.

DISPLACED POPULATION REMAINS LARGE

¶4. (U) Accion Social Coordinator Luis Mario Gaviria said that 40,000 families (200,000 people) in the region have been displaced due to armed conflict since the mid-1980's. The rate of displacement has diminished in recent years due to GOC efforts to isolate the FARC and dismantle paramilitary groups, but 2,000 families were displaced annually from 2002-2007. In 2008, the number of documented displacements fell to 280 with only 150 recorded so far in 2009. Gaviria said narcotrafficking activity continues to cause displacement, especially along the Gulf of Uraba. He added that Accion Social faces serious budget shortfalls that limit its ability to assist the current displaced population, estimated at over 150,000 people.

¶5. (U) Apartado Human Rights Ombudsman Coordinator Eyra Contreras is aware of three large-scale displacement events so far in 2009. The first took place on April 3 near the town of Balboa in the municipality of Unguia in northern Choco, affecting 109 families; the second on April 4 in the Toribio Medio district of Turbo on the Gulf of Uraba, affecting 20 families; and the third on April 21 in the town of Gilgal on the Gulf of Uraba in northern Choco, affecting 20 families. Contreras said small, armed groups fighting for control of productive land caused these displacements. She estimated that the local municipalities with the highest displacement numbers include Turbo (47,928); Apartado (29,031); and Mutata (16,016). In the part of Uraba which extends into Choco, 25,592 people have been displaced.

DEMOBILIZATION PROGRAMS "SUCCESSFUL WITH PROBLEMS"

¶6. (U) Giraldo said approximately 20% of demobilized paramilitaries have returned to illicit activities. MAPP-OEA's Aguilar agreed, but cautioned that this figure is merely an estimate extrapolated from the number of known demobilized persons among the region's prison population. It could be higher, he told us. Giraldo also said he has received messages from some members of Don Mario's gang stating that they want to demobilize. Still, he said current laws restrict them from doing so. Criminal group members are not eligible under the Justice and Peace Law, nor can they receive reintegration benefits.

RISING YOUTH VIOLENCE IN THE WAKE OF ARMED CONFLICT

¶7. (U) Apartado Secretary General of Government Maria Valez said there has been an alarming spike in youth crime and gang violence in Apartado. She linked the problem to a dearth of educational and employment opportunities due to lack of investment. Private investment is needed to create jobs and generate tax revenue to pay for social services, but investors' perceptions do not reflect the improved security situation. Meanwhile, her office is grappling with how best to address the youth crime/violence issue, but it lacks financial resources and has found little interest among civil society groups.

SECURITY HAS IMPROVED DESPITE ONGOING PROBLEMS

¶8. (U) Giraldo said that while the FARC, ELN, and other narcotraffickers remain serious problems, the overall

security situation has improved. The military has isolated the FARC in areas far-removed from major population centers, limiting its ability to infiltrate municipal governments, unions, and civil society. Similarly, GOC demobilization programs have eliminated right-wing paramilitary groups from this same public space. He said the elimination of the armed group presence has created the space for a nascent civil society to emerge. Other local figures shared this view. Accion Social's Gaviria claimed people in Uraba now have more faith in public institutions, and Apartado Government's Valez said improved security has allowed community and political groups to be more active.

¶9. (U) Regional labor leaders also said GOC security polices are working. Guillermo Rivera, President of SINTRAINAGRO, Colombia's preeminent banana-sector union with over 19,000 members, credited GOC policies for neutralizing the FARC and paramilitary groups in the region. He said FARC and paramilitary violence led to the murders of 1,200 people, including many union officials, in the banana industry over the last 20 years. Rivera said a recent strike in the banana sector that concluded in an agreement without violence or threats against union members was a clear indication that the situation has improved (reftel). Rivera also said the role of the military has been positive, and acknowledged a good working relationship between labor leadership and municipal authorities.

GIRALDO TRYING TO CLEAN HOUSE IN URABA

¶10. (C) Giraldo appears to be more serious than his predecessors about preventing human rights violations by the military and fostering trust and cooperation with local communities. Since January 2009, he has ordered the transfer of some 400 officers to other regions, including most of the staff officers and many non-commissioned officers, for suspicion of human rights violations and/or collusion with local criminal groups. Carte blanche to conduct a purge of bad elements was one of the general's conditions for agreeing to take command of the 17th Brigade, which has a notorious reputation due to past human rights abuses.

¶11. (U) Giraldo said 17th Brigade soldiers receive focused, intensive human rights training and specialized instructional materials. He showed us a booklet entitled "Legal Instructions for Guiding Troop Behavior Towards the Peace Community of San Jose de Apartado"--where former 17th Brigade officers have been implicated in numerous human rights abuses. He also showed us similar training materials on relations with indigenous communities. The 17th Brigade also runs an "anti-violence" outreach program in public schools. Soldiers and demobilized FARC and paramilitary members make monthly visits to explain to children why they should not join the FARC or criminal gangs.

NEW ROADS CONNECT ISOLATED COMMUNITIES

¶12. (U) Giraldo said the 17th Brigade is working with municipal authorities to construct roads that will increase people's access to markets and public services. The military provides the machines and operators (soldiers trained in road-building), and local communities provide the necessary fuel and pledge to maintain the roads (mainly dirt or gravel). Pilot projects are connecting Carepa, Antioquia with Aguas Blancas, Cordoba, and Acandí, Choco to Titumate, Choco (northern Choco). Mayors from around Uraba met with Giraldo in Apartado on June 17 to discuss how their communities could benefit from the program. Giraldo also told us he is trying to establish a "reconciliation village" in Currulao (near Turbo) where demobilized FARC and AUC members, displaced persons, and other victims of the armed conflict will learn to live and work together.